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Nicaragua guerrilla sent home

By BARBARA REHM

Washington (News Bureau)—A captured guerrilla who embarrassed the Reagan administration in its campaign to document Nicaraguan and Cuban involvement in El Salvador's civil war was set free, whisked out of Washington and flown back home yesterday.

The man—Orlando Jose Tardencillas Espinosa, 19, a Nicaraguan who was captured more than a year ago as he commanded rebels in two Salvadoran provinces—was brought before reporters at the State Department on Friday to tell how Cubans had trained him to fight in El Salvador. But he did a flip-flop and recanted the story, leaving officials here dumfounded and very red-faced.

A senior U.S. official, announcing Tardencillas' return home, tried to joke about the embarrassment as he arrived a bit late at the State Department to brief reporters about it.

"Sorry I'm late," the official said, "but I had to get the egg off my face."

A SPOKESMAN at the Nicaraguan Embassy here, Angela Saballos, said that Tardencillas was turned over yesterday to Ambassador Francisco Fiallos Navarro at 3 a.m., slept briefly at the embassy and was then placed on a plane bound for the Nicaraguan capital of Managua.

"He was very happy," Saballos said. "He was astonished. He expected to be sent back to Salvador and he expected to die."

Tardencillas had been flown here for the purpose of telling reporters that he had been given military training in Cuba and Ethiopia and ordered by the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua

to go to El Salvador and command rebel forces there in their fight against the U.S.-supported government.

That was the story he had told to a television audience in San Salvador last March and the story he repeated for U.S. officials just before his appearance here on Friday.

Instead, Tardencillas said that he went to El Salvador on his own "to fight facism" and was never ordered into the country by the Nicaraguan government. He denied that any foreigners fought with the rebels, saying, "I was the only foreigner." And he denied that he had ever received training in Cuba or Ethiopia.

THE FLIP-FLOP came just as the Reagan administration had unleashed an all-out campaign to overcome public and congressional skepticism about its policies in Central America. The Reagan team was trying to present "irrefutable" evidence of mounting Nicaraguan and Cuban intervention in

Salvador—intervention that it says is financed by the Soviet Union.

To that end it presented intelligence briefings for selected members of Congress and for high officials from past administrations and a press briefing, complete with spy-plane photographs to document its case.

The senior official, who met for an hour with reporters yesterday on the condition he not be identified, said that the U.S. is determined to deal with the issue of Salvador in Moscow and Havana as well as in the Central American region. He said that the U.S. had been in touch with both the Soviet Union and Cuba to demand cessation of the arming of insurgents in the Caribbean.

HE STRESSED that the issue in El Salvador "is a global problem. We have to deal with the problem in Moscow, in Havana and in the regional context of the Organization of American States and inside El Salvador itself."

"We don't have the luxury to deal with this problem in any other way," than to persuade the Soviet Union to back off its Cuban buildup and arms transfers, he said. Mexican President Jose Lopez Portillo shared that view, the official said, adding that the peace proposal offered by the Mexican had included many of the items the U.S. had itself discussed with the Cubans and Nicaraguans.

"They (the Mexicans) built on U.S. proposals" made last August, the official said, when Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Enders went to the region to persuade the Nicaraguans to accept a nonaggression pact with the neighbors. A possible peacekeeping force also was discussed.